

Ross Dowson, Revolutionary: A tribute, by Harry Kopyto

Ross Jewitt Dowson was born on September 4, 1917. His father passed on to him a lifelong love of books and radical ideas. Ross came to political consciousness during the dirty thirties when, as a young man, he witnessed the brutality and failure of the capitalist system and the efforts by workers to resist the degradation and poverty imposed on them.

At the age of 17, he told his mother that he would dedicate his life to becoming a professional revolutionary. He kept his promise fully by playing a leading role in the movements associated with the ideas of Leon Trotsky for the rest of his life.

Ross had one overwhelming and urgent imperative—to live each day of his life to build a socialist Canada in a socialist world. Ross never regarded the demands of the lifestyle that he chose—a frugal existence, a focus on political activity to the exclusion of marriage, constant exertion to take advantage of every opening for working-class agitation—as a sacrifice. Instead, he saw the political imperative both as an opportunity and an obligation that he dutifully fulfilled and that gave him a lasting measure of satisfaction. Cars, property, material wealth in all its forms meant nothing to him compared to the joy he felt at methodically building a better future for humanity by working for socialist democracy.

Ross was a worker and intellectual who possessed a unique and innovative mind. He methodically dissected a wide variety of news items every day and reviewed them periodically to assess and anticipate developments that would affect political events and the needs of the working-class. He would then develop a program and build an organization to lead workers and their allies to struggle for those demands that he saw as being transitional to a better world. It was this method that enabled him to anticipate what he considered to be the anti-capitalist dynamics of Canadian and Quebec nationalism and to coin expressions that summarized the political demands of broad, social protest movements such as “End Canada’s Complicity” in the anti-Vietnam war movement and “Every mother a willing mother, every child a wanted child” in the pro-choice movement.

Ross’ most significant contribution to revolutionary politics in Canada was his effort to link his organization to the fate of the broad left and trade union movement in Canada. The groups that Ross headed were fully committed to the NDP as Canada’s labour party—a position that gave Ross’ militant class struggle politics broad resonance and influence. Ross’ orientation to the working-class as a whole prevented his group from degenerating into an isolated sect on the sidelines of major political events. It also resulted in his supporters spurring the NDP into taking clear left-wing positions on various issues and integrating various social movements and protests into the Party.

A review of Ross’ political activities provides a glimpse of the high level of energy and consistency in his life: support for the Spanish Republican revolutionists between 1936 to 1939; the campaign in favour of financial payments instead of demeaning food vouchers to unemployed persons during the 1930s; opposition to conscription of soldiers as low paid railway workers in 1944; several campaigns for Mayor of Toronto including achieving 20% of the vote in 1950; playing a key role in the unification of the world-wide Trotskyist Fourth International in 1963; building an organization that played a leading role in the anti-Vietnam war movement and the women’s movement, the student power movement and the Quebec nationalist movement in the 1960s and 1970s; campaigning for a democratic, constituent assembly during the constitutional debate during the early 1980s; litigating against the RCMP Security

Service which he claimed defamed him by calling him subversive and speaking, writing and organizing to build an organized left inside the CCF and later, the NDP over a period of close to 60 years.

Ross died on February 18, 2002, following a debilitating stroke he experienced in 1989. His life remains a shining example of consistency and dedication to his socialist ideals.